

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application.

5

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (canceled)

10

2. (previously presented) The server according to claim 7, wherein:

the means for notifying is configured to select the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, and to send the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players; and

15

the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game.

3. (canceled)

20

4. (currently amended) The program storage medium according to claim 8, wherein the instructions for performing the method further comprise:

~~the notification program is configured to selecting~~ the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, and ~~to sending~~ the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players; and

25

the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game.

5. (canceled)

6. (previously presented) The method of claim 9, wherein the notification step includes:

selecting the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, wherein the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game; and  
5 sending the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players.

7. (currently amended) A server, operating with a competitive game program and a virtual game player list, and being configured for use on a network supporting a competitive game service for a number of actual game players to competitively play with one another, comprising:

a means for activating, configured such that when an actual game player receives the competitive game service, and the number of actual game players available to competitively play is below a predetermined number, the competitive game program is activated to operate as one or more virtual game players, each provided with different thinking routines, selected from the virtual game player list, wherein the virtual game players competitively play with the actual game players on the competitive game service; and

a means for notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players to competitively play after connection between the server and the actual game players is discontinued temporally, the means for notifying being configured such that the virtual game players appear to the actual game players as actual game players ~~and are provided with different thinking routines.~~

8. (currently amended) A program storage medium for use in a server, the server operating with a competitive game program and a virtual game player list[,] ~~and the server being configured for use on a network supporting a competitive game service for a number of actual game players to competitively play with one another, the program storage~~  
5 medium having computer-executable instructions for performing a method comprising:

~~an activation program configured such that when an actual game player receives the competitive game service, and the number of actual game players available to competitively play is below a predetermined number, activating the competitive game program is activated to operate as one or more virtual game players, each provided with~~  
10 different thinking routines, selected from the virtual game player list being conditioned on the event that an actual game player receives the competitive game service and the number of actual game players available to competitively play is below a predetermined number,  
wherein the virtual game players competitively play with the actual game players on the competitive game service; and

15 ~~a notification program configured to notify~~ notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players to competitively play after connection between the server and the actual game players is discontinued temporally, the notification program being configured such that wherein the virtual game players appear to the actual game players as actual game players ~~and are provided with different thinking routines.~~

20

9. (currently amended) A method for providing one or more virtual game players on a network supporting a competitive game service for a number of actual game players to competitively play with one another, comprising:

activating a competitive game program to operate as one or more virtual game  
5 players, each provided with different thinking routines, selected from a virtual game player list, the step of activating being conditioned on the event that an actual game player receives the competitive game service, and the number of actual game players available to competitively play is below a predetermined number, wherein the virtual game players competitively play with the actual game players on the competitive game service; and

10 notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players to competitively play after connection between the server and the actual game players is discontinued, wherein the virtual game players appear to the actual game players as actual game players ~~and are provided with different thinking routines.~~

15 10. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the competitive game program is configured to support playing, as a two-player competitive game, one or more games selected from the group of: mah-jong, shogi, igo, chess and othello.

20 11. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the competitive game program is configured to support playing a tournament composed of a plurality of the same kinds of games.

25 12. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the means for notifying is configured to select a virtual game player of a player class similar to that of an actual game player to be notified.

30 13. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the means for activating is configured such that actual game players may review their games after such games are completed.

14. (canceled)

15. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the means for activating is configured to provide game players with a training program to develop their playing skills.

5           16. (new) The server of claim 7, wherein the means for notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players provides information that preparation for a game is completed excluding any information that presented competitors are virtual players.

10           17. (new) The server of claim 7, wherein the means for notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players provides as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players such that the virtual game players appear to the actual game players as other actual game players.

15           18. (new) The program storage medium of claim 8, wherein the step of notifying includes providing information that preparation for a game is completed excluding information that presented competitors are virtual players set in accordance with the competitive game program.

20           19. (new) The program storage medium of claim 8, wherein the step of notifying includes providing as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players.

25           20. (new) The method of claim 9, wherein the step of notifying includes providing information that preparation for a game is completed excluding information that presented competitors are virtual players set in accordance with the competitive game program.

30           21. (new) The method of claim 9, wherein the step of notifying includes providing as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players.